

UIUC Muslim American Students and their Perceived Generational Differences in Religious Affiliation

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ABSTRACT:

This study consists of one 90 minute interview with two current University of Illinois students who identify as second-generation Muslim American, and explores the autobiographical discourse of their ethnic, national, and religious identity, as well as their perceptions of the ethnic, national, and religious identities of their parents' and grandparents' generations. Since identities and cultural practices shifts across generations, due to individual, familial, cultural, societal, and political factors, subjects were asked to give details about their nationality, how long their family has lived in America, their family's origins, how they identify ethnically and religiously, how they think their parents and grandparents would identify ethnically and religiously, and why they think those similarities and differences in their faith exist across generations. They were also asked what factors will influence the next generation's faith decisions. This research reveals how these two second-generation Muslim Americans perceive affiliation with Islam in American as more of a choice, and for them, a religion more easily distinguished from the cultures of their parents' background.

Keywords: Oral History, Muslim American identity, religion, second-generation, Americanization

Although it is clear that Islam has existed in the United States since it was brought over to the Americans via the transatlantic slave trade, Islam in a diversity of sects and expressions continues to be practiced by Muslim families, a wave who immigrated here between 1875 and 1912, and many post the 1965 Immigration Act (Diouf 1998; Curtis 2009; Moore 1995; Haddad 2000). This act brought a flow of diverse ethnic, linguistic, tribal, national and religious communities, for religious, political, and economic reasons, making the United States even more religiously heterogeneous than before (Haddad, 2000, p.20). As families and communities

migrate, it is often the case that they are forced to assimilate or are able to acculturate, as they are met with new communities, contexts and spaces which may not fully support their previous lifestyles and national identities. “Immigration decisions are membership decisions” (qtd. in Moore, 1995, p.21). New cultural practices are picked up, while old cultural practices may be retained, lost, or transformed. In the realm of religious practice and identity, for Muslims migrating to America, because there is much variation of experience, affiliation, and practice, each of their stories of passing on the Islamic faith from one generation to the next can provide useful insight into religious identity and Americanization.

Esposito (2000) states that Muslims are already on the path to Americanization, and what that means is to be discussed and determined (p.4). On one hand, Muslim families in America are trying to discover answers to challenges, such as which language they plan on teaching their children, how to pass on their faith to the next generation, how to help their children be accepted, and if and when America will truly recognize Islam as a positive contribution to multiculturalism and pluralism in this nation (Haddad, 2000, p.20). “The primary question facing Muslims in America is whether or not they can live Muslim lives in a non-Muslim territory. Especially for immigrants raised in Muslim-majority countries, this is a particularly vexing question” (Esposito, 2000, p.5). By listening to the perspectives of second-generation Muslim Americans’ personal experience with discovering and taking ownership of their faith, and their perceptions of their parents’ generation’s faith in America and before coming to the United States, conclusions can be drawn about how religion survives across context, and what forces are believed to keep it going.

SETTINGS and METHODS

This study focused on a 90 minute interview with two second-generation Muslim Americans, who are current undergraduate students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who I will refer to as Neha and Zeeshan. The female student, Neha, was referred to me for an interview by a Resident Advisor I work with, and Zeeshan was a male friend of Neha's. My subjects were following the EUI protocol for how to use the IRB. We met in the conference room of the Asian American Cultural Center on campus. I asked them about their ethnic, religious, and national identity, as well as their parents' and grandparents' ethnic, religious, and national identity, and then had them talk about the differences and similarities between generations, specifically in regards to their practice of Islam. I also asked them about their thoughts on what will influence the next generation's decisions about identifying with Islam. I was interested in learning about their families histories, how they identify with their families' background and the cultures of the countries their parents immigrated from, in what ways they identify with and practice Islam, and how they see their identification and practice of Islam as the same or different from their parents and previous generations.

Neha and Zeeshan are both second generation Muslim Americans from the Chicago suburban area. Neha's parents are from Pakistan, and Neha identifies as American, mixed with her parents background, and she is Muslim. She identifies more as American just because she grew up here. Her parents raised her Muslim, and although she is Sunni Muslim, she prefers to not make that distinction and just identify as Muslim. Her parents and grandparents were also raised Muslim. Neha went to an Islamic school growing up, and in high school she volunteered at a mosque, which helped her feel more Muslim, since she was contributing to the community.

She may have some ancestry in Burma. Grandparents identify themselves as Indian, but moved to Bahrain, and her dad also grew up partially in Bahrain. It helped him see more types of Islam and be better able to differ culture and religion more. Her mom and dad came to the United States together in their 20s, to attend college, and are now psychologists. Neha said that “they would identify as pretty much Pakistani, but also Americanized” since they’ve lived here for over two decades.

Zeeshan’s mother is from Pakistan, and his father is from India. Zeeshan identifies as American and mixed with his parents background. He considers himself ethnically as half Pakistani and half Indian and American. He grew up Sunni Muslim, and thinks that even if he wasn’t brought up Muslim, it would be something he would be interested in. Zeeshan’s mother considers herself more Pakistani, and doesn’t understand American culture as much as Pakistani culture. His father has a better understanding of American culture since he came to this country at a younger age than his mother. Zeeshan described his dad: “he probably identifies more as half and half or even. Growing up in different countries, religiously, Pakistan had a majority who practice Islam, and India too had people similar to them to help them gain knowledge.” He said that his grandparents and past generations always had a Muslim upbringing and people all around them were Muslim. For his parents, coming to America and being exposed to other religions and still choosing Islam solidifies their faith.

Cultural Practices vs. Religious Practices

Most Muslims believe that there is one true Islam, yet depending on which Islamic sect, a heterogeneous array of theologies, attitudes histories, interpretations, and applications are

professed to be true (Esposito, 2000, p.4) My interviewees affiliate with Sunni Islam, which is the faith of the majority of Muslims in the world as well as in United States. They adhere to the five basic tenets or the five pillars of Islam which are: the *shahada* or declaration of faith that “there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God;” structured prayer five times a day, fasting during the lunar month of Ramadan; the *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one’s lifetime; and *zakat* or deeds of charity (Ali-Karamali, 2008, p.6-26).

Both Neha and Zeeshan believe that their religion is fundamentally the same as their parents’ and grandparents’ because for Sunni Muslims, their faith is about the five basic pillars of Islam, which according to them, does not change across generations, history, or context. Zeeshan explained that “Islam, in general, you have to separate from the culture. Islam itself, the religion itself you cannot really change, but you can bring in cultural elements in how you practice it.” He supports the idea that the fundamentals of Islam are core to the religion, and these religious practices can be upheld by all Muslims no matter which culture or context they belong to.

Zeeshan:

“Being American has not really changed my ability to do those things. In terms of those five things, we don’t do the main things that are essential any differently. My parents’ cultural influence makes them think certain practices are an Islamic thing. I can’t think of any specifics. Basically, it’s not much different. The faith itself is the same.”

This explanation illustrates Zeeshan and Neha’s perception that the religion they practice is the fundamentally same as their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, since they are able to

follow the five pillars of Islam in America, just as their relatives and ancestors followed it in majority-Muslim countries. On the other hand, because their parents and grandparents and past generations grew up in countries where Islam was apart of the culture of those nations, Neha and Zeeshan view their parents' and grandparents' generations' practice of Islam as very enmeshed in Pakistani or Indian culture, whereas they see their own practices of Islam as having a freedom or distinction from those Pakistani and Indian cultural influences. They believe that having grown up in America, they can distinguish what is an Islamic practice, and what is apart of Pakistani or Indian culture, in contrast to their parents, grandparents, and relatives, who have a harder time separating what is true of the religion and what is cultural. For example, Neha explained that her cousins in Pakistan think the cultural practice of taking off one's shoes in the house is Islamic, when Neha understands that it is not Islamic, but apart of Pakistani culture.

Neha and Zeeshan do identify with American culture and claim that it has influenced their religious practice, which Neha discussed, saying: "Here we practice an American version of Islam. You always tend to mix it with culture, that is inevitable....Here, it's easier to mix it less, because it's so opposite sometimes, in some regards, like drinking in stuff. So sometimes it's easy not to mix it at all." Although she admits that their identification with American culture has affected how they practice Islam, she did not give specific examples of the American version of Islam that they practice, only explaining that it is not as challenging for them to practice a culturally and religiously mixed version. Her explanation only focused on the way American culture and Islam are "so opposite sometimes," referring to drinking alcohol as an example, illustrates the dichotomy that exists in her mind about the way of American mainstream society, and the way of Islam. The dichotomy she refers to is a reality of identity politics. "This type of

politics characterizes the identity politics of self vs. ‘external other,’ and this dynamic is now reproduced in Muslim politics in America, manifesting itself in the dichotomy of America vs. Islam” (Khan, 2000, p.94). On another note, it is interesting that she finds it easy to not be influenced by American culture to drink alcohol, in light of the amount of money corporations spend each year on advertising alcohol consumption, specifically targeting college students. Perhaps since she can be categorized as highly religious according to Peek (2005), her religious prohibitions such as abstaining from alcohol are easier for her to follow.

Americanized

Neha and Zeeshan’s understanding and claim as Americanized sheds light to the experience of second-generation Muslim American identity formation. One important component to being Americanized or not is whether the second-generation in the United States has been able to retain the language that their parents grew up speaking. For Neha, “Urdu is my second language, and English is my first because I am so much better at English. Knowing Urdu would make me much more Pakistani.” Neha can understand it when other people speak it, but her language fluency is not as good as her English language fluency. To not know Urdu at all according to her dad would mean “you’re too Americanized.” For Pakistani Americans, Indian Americans, Arab Americans, and dozens of children of immigrants, language fluency is a marker of identity and assimilation. Unfortunately, the United States lacks resources in public schools and often in communities as well, for helping children retain fluency and gain literacy in the numerous languages that are spoken in the United States and around the world.

Within the second-generation, there is a variety of Americanization, according to Neha, who expressed, “I feel like my younger brother and his friends seem to be more Americanized and those older than them are more rooted in their parents’ culture.” Zeeshan agreed that the younger ones tend to be more Americanized than they seem to be, and the older ones seem to be more affiliated with their parents’ culture. Their observations can be explained by a number of factors, including the extra time parents may have with older children before younger children are born, the degree to which parents may become more Americanized themselves over time as they have more children, perhaps the expectations of older children to be role models and the freedom that younger children often have, and perhaps also the exposure of younger children to American culture could be greater than for older children. More research must be done about Neha and Zeeshan’s perceptions about the spectrum of Americanization among their own generation.

Neha described their generation, claiming, “the way we think is a lot more American.” She traveled to Egypt once, and it was there abroad that she realized how American she was. “It’s an Islamic culture there, but I couldn’t really identify with it, so I realized how American I am.” Her cross-cultural travel abroad experience to Egypt revealed to her that she thinks like an American and identifies more with American culture and identity. Her American national and cultural identity became salient to her as she was immersed in what she called “Islamic culture.” It is unclear what she meant by “Islamic culture,” and it is interesting that she referred to it as “Islamic culture” and not “Egyptian culture” or “Arab culture,” etc. This shows that although she identifies with Islam, going abroad to a majority-Muslim country highlighted her roots in the American way of thinking.

Individual choice

Neha and Zeeshan believe their affiliation with Islam is a *chosen identity*, which is the second religious identity level, that shows cognitive analysis in identification and practice, the first level being *ascribed identity* and the third and final level being *declared identity* (Peek 2005). They believe that even though their parents raised them Muslim, they have showed maturity by choosing to be Muslim. This is similar to the interviewees in Peek's study, who "believed it was 'only natural' that as they matured, they would begin to contemplate more important life questions and their religious backgrounds, and hence re-examine that aspect of their identities" (1995, p.227). Zeeshan explained that "in college, no one forces us to pray or fast or follow the five pillars of Islam, but we choose to." He gave an example of when he and his friends are playing soccer in a field and it is time to pray, he is able to stop to do so on the field, that there is always water around to clean themselves, which is an example of how any Muslim can choose to practice their faith daily if they truly want to. This mentality emphasizes individual freedom in religious practice, which I would argue has roots in the context that Neha and Zeeshan are living in.

This context is complex and can be analyzed at many levels, yet this analysis ahead will focus briefly on the context of college, during the post-civil-rights era and post-9/11 era, and specifically at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In college, the typical student has the opportunity to become more and more independent and responsible, and this is the time they are expected and given permission to behave like an adult. For those who are able to go to college, it is a critical period to reflect and discover one's personal and social identity. According to Peek, "the campus setting provided space and time to explore their identities and make choices

about who they wanted to be and how they wanted to live their lives. Ultimately, it enabled them to further construct a Muslim religious identity” (Peek, 2005, p.227). In Eboo Patel’s book *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, it is clear that the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a place for students like Patel and my interviewees to think about their identity. Patel (2007) was consciously trying to process and understand identity politics, first thinking a lot about race, and once becoming a resident advisor, he received training to think about multiple social identities, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and he later realized how important religious identity is in diversity dialogues (p.48). For Neha and Zeeshan, their said experiences of religious freedom on campus leads them to think of their faith as a personal choice to practice daily, as if the campus and nation is multicultural enough for them to do what they need to do. Neha mentioned that sometimes their class schedule interferes with when they need to pray, but they just have to try their best to pray between classes, and they are able to go to the Illini Union to their space in the Registered Student Organizations’ office to pray privately. She also explained that she wears the hijab by choice, while her mother chooses not to wear a hijab, and other female relatives in their family either choose to or not. Again, the emphasis on religious practice shows freedom of individuals to take action in practicing faith. Although both my interviewees perceive their experience of individual religious freedom on campus, the next step would be to highlight cultural and institutional barriers at the University of Illinois and across the nation that have in the past and presently oppress Muslim Americans.

Neha and Zeeshan think the future generations will also be Muslim mostly by individual choice as well, as Neha and Zeeshan experienced. They did mention expecting family influence,

but do not see it as having the same importance as the next generation individually taking steps for their Muslim faith to be a chosen identity. Zeeshan explained his hopes for his children: “I would want them to make an individual choice as well. I wouldn’t want my family to influence them as much as my parents’ families influenced them. I would raise them Muslim, but I want them to make their own decision about their religion. I want them to influence themselves later. I guess my family would influence them as well, like teach them things they need to know. I don’t think society will influence them as much, and politically it’s not really an issue, well it is an issue but not so much because it’s not something that would really stop you from being Muslim.” Individual agency and choice is important to them in their Muslim American identity and practice of Islam.

Neha agreed with Zeeshan and added: “I think the next generation will be less cultural,” referring to them ascribing less to Pakistani culture, and confessed that she’s “kind of afraid that they’ll be more American,” while her hope is for them to be more balanced. “As for faith, I hope that it doesn’t go away, because sometimes if you take away the Pakistani culture, or the Muslim culture in the house, sometimes the faith will go away. But you can’t really tell, since we’re only the second-generation now.” It sounds like Neha believes that it is possible that the more American the future generation will be, perhaps the chances of passing on the Muslim faith will decrease, so perhaps there is a link between ethnic and religious culture in the household.

The association between Americanization and individual choice seems to be supported by my interviewees’ narratives about cultural and religious identity formation and practice. Since American culture influences individualism, independence, and self-determination, those who subscribe to the dominant American ideology of the self seem to identify more with believing

that the individual person functions as the empirical self, an individual acting in the world autonomously (Hong 2001; Ibrahim 1997). This is an illusion because everyone, including racialized and religious communities, as in the case of Muslim Americans, are influenced by the local and national community, the portrayal of Muslims in the media, government policies, educational policies, etc. Those who assimilate more are treated with more dignity and respect, while those who stand out more as different are ostracized, targeted, attacked, and abused, such as the case of women in hijab post-9/11 (Cainker 2009). “Arab and Muslim Americans are now routinely profiled in their places of employment, in housing, for public opinion polls, and in the media” (Bayoumi 2008, p.4-5).

CONCLUSIONS:

One critical piece from this study is how much emphasis Neha and Zeeshan put on individual choice in being Muslim American and practicing, for themselves and the next generation. Both of them believe they chose to be Muslim, by reason that in contrast to their parents’ upbringing, Islam is not the dominant religion of the United States. Their choices in college to adhere to the five pillars of Islam without anyone forcing them to practice their faith, signifies to them that their faith as Muslims is their individual choice. Another finding is that they believe fundamentally, Islam, specifically the five pillars of Islam, is practiced the same and does not change from generation to generation and across countries and contexts, even though sometimes cultural influences are mixed in. They are able to separate Islamic practices from their parents’ cultural practices, and although Neha and Zeeshan do identify with American culture

and express that they too practice Islam that is culturally influenced by American culture, they were not specific in identifying what that American Islam looks like in their lives.

Future interviews and research should focus more on how these students identify American culture, as well as what the mix of Pakistani American or Indian American culture looks like, and what Muslim American culture might be. Additionally, it would be important to look at if and how being Americanized might influence Muslim Americans' perceptions of individual religious freedom and identity, while perhaps ignoring the significant impact of wider societal influences, institutional discrimination, systematic oppression, and the influence of politics and policies. "[America's] prosperity and freedom attracts them, but...its policies and its attitudes toward Muslims and Islam alienates them" (Khan, 2000, p.95) They are affected by Islamophobia, by society's perception of Muslims as "others," by "workplace discrimination, warfare in their countries of origin, government surveillance...and all kinds of other problems that thrive in the age of terror" (Rana 2007; Bayoumi, 2008, p.12). For Higher Education Administration, more research and initiatives must be implemented to understand and uncover how Muslim American college students experience multiculturalism and diversity, while at the same time how the university can put a larger value on social justice to empower these students to more clearly expose and voice how factors beyond individual choice and family may influence Muslim American identity.

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